Who’s Your Audience? Why Developmental Stage Matters

Each stage of life has "jobs" that each individual needs to learn in order to go on and live a healthy or productive life. Many people who study human development believe that if the "jobs" at a particular stage are not learned, people get "stuck" at this stage of development and will be less successful (at work, at home and within themselves) than those who master their "jobs." As you work with young people, it's important to keep in mind the developmental stage they're going through. Programmers should strive for clarity to the questions "Who is our audience?" and “How can this age group best be served?”

Learning Experiences for Different Developmental Stages

Understanding the characteristics and tasks of learners at various stages of development will help you provide opportunities and experiences that are most appropriate for differing age groups. As they grow, young people go through many changes – physical, thinking, social and emotional. By learning about the developmental stages of youth and adapting your programming to provide experiences that maximize learning, you can help your audience master their developmental stage.

Mastering the developmental needs of each stage of youth development is critical for youth to fully develop important life skills they’ll need as an adult. Pre-college programs should effectively address these developmental needs.

Following is a brief outline of the general physical, social, emotional and intellectual characteristics of developmental stages and their implications for program development.

- **Ages 6 to 8:** Youth in this age group are trying to master large and small physical skills and tend to enjoy opportunities to move around. They like to make things with their hands but are often more concerned about the process of doing things than on the final product. Their fine motor skills are still developing, so kids this age may have a hard time perfecting skills such as cutting, sewing, hammering and gluing. Kids aged 6 to 8 tend to be concrete thinkers based in reality and accuracy and may be confused by abstract concepts. They are beginning to understand the notion of cause and effect. They are learning how to be friends and beginning to place more emphasis on other people. Youth this age are beginning to be able to take another's perspective and feel empathy, but they're still largely focused on themselves. The influence of family and family relationships are very important.

  Implications for program development: Focus on one idea at a time and keep concepts clear, concrete and simple. Create experiences and activities that are hands-on, active and fun. Include opportunities for the group to get up and move around with breaks for rest and quiet time as well. Use humor and silliness generously! Nurture their developing sense of empathy by including short discussions and activities that help them learn about people and how their actions affect others. Include connections, communications and opportunities for family involvement in the learning experiences. The approval of other adults and peers is important to them, as well. Focus on cooperation, nurture their love of learning and limit exposure to competition and awards.

- **Ages 9 to 11:** Youth in this age group show steady increases in muscle development, strength and coordination. There is wide variation in physical maturity, with girls generally ahead of boys. Nine to eleven-year-olds like to do things and move around, and may get bored and antsy if forced to sit and listen for too long. Youth this age may prefer to be with members of the same sex and generally prefer to learn in cooperative groups. They admire and emulate older youth. Kids this age

tend to show increasing skills in reasoning and emerging abilities to think abstractly. They tend to enjoy trying new things, learning new skills, collecting things and exploring various areas of interest. Family relationships are still very important. They may begin to question parental authority and look to other caring adults for guidance and as role models.

Implications for program development: Provide activities that are hands-on and minds-on. Strike a balance of learning opportunities that engage the head (thinking), heart (emotional) and hands (skill-building). Remember that the great variation in maturity will make some kids shine and others fail at sports and activities that require physical abilities. Create opportunities for youth to learn cooperatively in groups. Environments that encourage appreciation, respect and tolerance for others tap their growing sense of empathy and humanity. Provide meaningful, purposeful activities and build in opportunities for discussion facilitated by caring, knowledgeable adults or older teens. Facilitated group learning works well with this age group. Keep in mind that kids this age are still fairly concrete in their thinking and would generally prefer to make or do things rather than just talk about them.

- **Ages 12 to 14:** Youth in this age group experience rapid growth, with girls maturing physically faster than boys. Body image issues become extremely important to many in this age range. Awkwardness and clumsiness may be a result of rapidly growing bodies. Significant changes in social, thinking and emotional growth are taking place as well. This is the “so what?” age, when things to have immediate relevance to them in order for them to be interested. Youth this age can be intensely focused on things that interest them. Experiential learning (do, share, reflect, apply) is very important for this age group. Issues of justice and equality often become very important. Twelve to fourteen-year-olds are more able to work independently on projects but still enjoy working cooperatively in groups. They want to feel like they have input into decisions that affect their learning and their lives. Family relationships are still important and they are also influenced by other caring, involved, respected adults. Peer influences - both positive and negative - are very important to this age group.

  Implications for program development: Provide meaningful, purposeful opportunities for learning to occur within an experiential learning process of doing, sharing, reflecting and applying. Continue to provide engaging hands-on learning activities and include ample time for reflection and discussion so that activities don't fall flat and seem stupid. Kids this age typically want to know the "so what" of everything, so help them see how what they're learning applies to their present and future lives. Give many opportunities for young people to make choices and feel in charge of their own learning.

- **Ages 15 to 18:** This can be a period of “storm and stress” when one moment the teen acts as an adult and the next as a child. Youth this age have generally "grown into their bodies" and most have a more realistic view of their physical strengths and limitations. Body image issues may still be very significant for some in a culture that over-emphasizes looks and appearance. Youth this age have a need to feel a growing sense of independence and want to be put in more adult leadership roles. They want to be listened to and treated with respect. Adults who serve more as guides and facilitators will be more accepted by teens this age than those who preach, teach and tell. Teens want a say in decisions that affect them. Young people 15 to 18 years old are typically quite focused on knowledge and skill development that will prepare them for college and future careers. Their abstract thinking skills are improving and they are better able to imagine the impact of present behavior and decisions on their future lives. They enjoy considering multiple perspectives, reflection, discussion and sharing what they've learned. Many older teens find working with younger children enjoyable and rewarding. Teens aged 15 to 18 will quickly lose patience with activities that seem to have no purpose or meaning.

Implications for program development: Provide opportunities for teens to give input into their own learning and make choices about what and how they'll learn. Youth this age still prefer to do rather than to be lectured at, so build opportunities around the experiential learning process of doing, reflecting, sharing and applying so that activities are engaging, purposeful and meaningful. Create opportunities for all participants to be in leadership roles within smaller and larger groups. Help adults who work with teens focus on and strengthen their roles as guides and facilitators. Encourage and create opportunities for teens to become teachers and guides of younger children around your program content if possible. Provide opportunities or the foundation for teens to use their voice, talents and skills as valuable resources in their communities.

- **Ages 19 and up:** If you're developing a program or curriculum for adult learners, consider that adults are usually interested in satisfying immediate needs, prefer to choose what they learn, and learn best in comfortable, emotionally, socially and physically safe environments. Research shows that adults learn best from enthusiastic presenters, have a wide range of past experiences that are important to them and usually have many other responsibilities and things on their mind as they try to stay engaged in learning. (Note that older teens and adults have essentially the same learning needs!) For more resources on adult learning visit *http://www.gwu.edu/~tip/knowles.html*.

  Implications for program development: Adult learners like to feel in control of their learning process, so avoid giving only one prescribed approach to learning and teaching. Give adult learners choices, present material in user-friendly, easy-to-understand and useful ways. Give them what they need in terms of information but also suggest ways they can learn more about the topic if they're interested.

More Ways to Contribute to Health Youth Development – Tips for Building Diversity Sensitivity

- Be mindful of the resources that students have access to. Build in flexibility and ideas for ways they can adapt activities requiring specialized equipment or materials.
- Words and pictures are very powerful. When you create materials, be aware that the language and images that accompany materials speak volumes about the value placed on various cultural, ethnic, racial and other groups. Materials that are biased and exclusionary will communicate to some groups that they are not welcomed or valued. Choose language and images that powerfully illustrate that diversity is recognized, understood and celebrated - and that people are valued as teachers and learners regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, social class, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, physical abilities and other differences.
- Create opportunities within the content your programming for students to learn about and share their cultural backgrounds and differences with others. Encourage an environment of safety and respect so that young people have opportunities to build and strengthen their positive self-identity.
- Be sensitive to physical differences and abilities. If an activity requires a high level of movement, for example, suggest ways the activity could be adapted for all kids in the group if there's a child with physical differences. A little creativity and cooperation goes a long way when adapting learning activities so that everyone can have a good experience.
- Create caring, moral learning communities by integrating universal ethical values into everything you do with students. The principles of trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, caring, fairness and citizenship help to build unity as well as encourage acceptance, tolerance and understanding of the differences that exist among individuals and groups.

AGES & STAGES QUIZ

Adapted from AgriLife Extension Texas A&M System

Match each characteristic with the appropriate age group. Some characteristics may seem to fit in more than one age group. Choose the BEST answer! *Answers are shown in red.*

A. 6-8 year olds B. 9-11 year olds C. 12-14 year olds D. 15-18 year olds

__B____ 1. Boys sit on one wall and girls on the other wall during the dance.

__D____ 2. Boys and girls may have problems with their complexion (acne).

__B____ 3. This age imitates older boys and girls.

__A____ 4. Still has difficulty sometimes in small motor skills like tying shoes.

__C____ 5. There is a vast array of heights and sizes of kids for this age group.

__B____ 6. Follows rules well and respects adult's authority.

__D____ 7. Boys and girls are becoming more "couple" oriented.

__A____ 8. Can only handle one mental operation at a time.

__D____ 9. Boys have hearty appetites and girls are finicky eaters.

__A____ 10. Changes attention span often to new topics.

__C____ 11. Have begun learning how to think abstractly and hypothetically.

__D____ 12. Will not participate well in meaningless activities.

__A____ 13. Learning to be friends and develop best friends.

__B____ 14. Believes in the morals and values of parents.

__C____ 15. Beginning to seek privacy from parents/adults.